

THE CULT OF EFFICIENCY

BY ROLAND HUGINS

THE decline of liberty is one of the outstanding facts of our time, and is no less significant because undiscerned by many and discussed by few. The institutions of society are being molded gradually but steadily in the direction of more rigid restraints. At the same time respect for liberty in the abstract, for liberty as an ideal, is declining even more rapidly than its practice. It is true that the new social forces hostile to individual rights, as they used to be called, do not have the field entirely to themselves, and that they are opposed and impeded by the more liberal traditions of a former day. But the resistance grows more and more feeble. Despite temporary repulses, the new forces push steadily forward, with liberty and individualism on the defensive and in retreat.

The old enthusiasm for freedom is yielding to the cult of efficiency. Social ideals seldom die of old age, or fade like dying fires. They are displaced by other ideals and new social values. The ascendant ideal in our day is the concept of social efficiency. Efficiency of the group and of the nation is admired not only as a shining marvel in itself, but as the miracle which produces our prosperity and our greatness. Before this latest god, with its two mighty arms of organization and machinery, the world really worships, whatever its ostensible creeds. Practically everyone is proud to be a unit in an efficient group, community, or nation; or if these aspirations seem too narrow, then a unit in an efficient civilization.

So penetrating are the currents of thought with which all persons are washed that even professed liberals yield to the new influences, and sacrifice liberty to efficiency with something like enthusiasm. To a degree that few people seem to realize this new idea has come to permeate the whole intellectual and emotional atmosphere of our time. It dominates our opinions on industry, morals,

war, politics, and progress. It has become a technique to be followed for its own sake, irrespective of the object in view, and without scrutiny of the consequences. The human mind is so constituted, apparently, that it must push a good idea too far, and turn a serviceable concept into a fetish, a superstition. Of course this obsession does not grip all temperaments with equal force, but it influences practically every one to some extent, since no one can quite escape the mental climate of the age in which he lives. Where in this day do we find any affirmative and burning faith in individual rights? What section of opinion has not been stirred by a zeal for some kind of social efficiency? Sparks from this blaze have fallen on all the camps, conservative and radical. You can trace its scorch on Communists, Laborites, Progressives, Liberals, Tories, Royalists, Fascisti. Many political groups which stand at swords points one to another really cherish aims which are fundamentally alike. Nations which would like to tear each other's eyes out are, in basic purposes, as identical as cats.

Of course real efficiency, as distinguished from pseudo-efficiency, has its place and utility. In factory or office, its apparatus of book-keeping machines, time-motion studies, performance records; and its program for the routing work, standardization of equipment, and organization of personnel, combine to form a labor-saving device. Where thousands of employees, using great quantities of power and material, tending expensive machines, and fabricating complicated products, work together under one roof or under one management, co-ordination becomes a vital matter. Some particular arrangement of all these factors, human and mechanical, will in any given plant or organization prove to be the most economical and productive: and to discover this best arrangement is the business of the efficiency expert. But even here the application of efficiency requires special safeguards. Operations are often made so rapid and continuous that they strain human endurance. Labor unions have rightly protested against the excesses of scientific management, and have fought those drivers and pace-setters who strive to "squeeze the last drops of output from human effort." Moreover, all the overlords of efficiency, from Pullman to Ford, have shown an inclination to regulate the personal habits and the private affairs of the men on their pay-rolls. The excuse is obvious. What a workingman does in his leisure time may affect his productivity in working hours; and a little rashness in the pursuit of happiness may make him late the next morning. The employee is therefore forced to accept, under pain of los-

ing his job, a thinly disguised supervision of his pleasures, his morals and his expenditures. The attitude of these paternalistic employers is well illustrated by the order which was posted in all the plans, shops, and offices of Henry Ford sometime in July, 1924. This order read: "From this date on, dismissal, without opportunity for appeal, will be the penalty imposed on any man found to have the odor of beer, wine, or other liquor on his breath or to have intoxicants on his person or in his house." Ford succeeds even in out-doing Volstead.

The role of true efficiency is strictly limited. It is a methodology for getting some of the coarser and more material business of the world done expeditiously. From a labor-saving device, useful in its proper sphere, efficiency in our day has been expanded into an all-inclusive social ideal. Thus distended and misapplied, the gospel of social efficiency works grave mischief. It takes account of only one side of human nature. It has no place for light-heartedness, and abstracts from life its spontaneous and joyous elements. Our world grows progressively drabber, more somber, and more repressed. Parades, celebrations, and public spectacles become less frequent; fairs, carnivals, and festivals less gay. Any boisterous mirth or hilarity is viewed with suspicion. There are now many sections of the United States where a man or woman singing in the streets would literally be regarded as either drunk or insane. One would think that as life within working hours grew duller, less interesting, and more monotonous, every effort would be made to render life outside the factory and office more diverting and colorful. But no, the whole of existence must be subjected to a devastating routine. In this new dour world each person is expected as far as possible to follow a fixed schedule. He is to arise at the same hour each morning; he is to give eight or nine hours of concentrated labor; and at night he is to indulge only in a mild relaxation, such as a movie show or a radio concert. And this routine is to be maintained for years, broken only by an annual two weeks' vacation with pay. He is never to have a fling, never to let his spirit cavort. In short, human beings are to become automatons, each with a maximum productive output. But such a life is unnatural, and revolts most people,—revolts all people in fact, except those few who are the quintessence of all the bourgeois virtues. The spirit of man grows restive under such complete regimentation. The soul will inevitably have its compensations, its relapses. If such dismal uniformity pre-

vails, all our social engineering will be insufficient to prevent the roof of society from caving in periodically.

The fetish of efficiency fosters a subtle depravity. Concentrating as it does on means rather than ends, it has no spiritual reality, and imposes, therefore, no restraint on any evil passion or debasing doctrine. Our age is supposedly an age of rationalism; yet religious bigotries, racial enmities, and nationalistic hatreds blaze as though fed with some secret fuel. And most disheartening of all is the growth of callousness to human suffering, especially a murderous insensibility to the horrors of war. Men now turn away from the picture of overcrowded and reeking hospitals behind the battle-lines with a shrug. But they are captivated by the spectacle of a modern army on the move, advancing with its tanks and artillery, with its streams of infantry and equipment, accompanied by squadrons of aircraft, all highly disciplined and articulated. The worship of efficiency leads directly to a reverence for force. Men now admire the strong organization, and at the apex of their admiration stands the Great State: the powerful nation self-sufficient in economic resources and machinery; panoplied with military and naval armaments; commanding the services of scientists, engineers, and every type of expert; alert to act in emergencies, and irresistible in war. This vision has captured the imagination of the modern man.

And here, doubtless, we have the key to a paradox which the events of the last ten years have made evident. The paradox lies in the gap between intentions and deeds, and between expectations and results. It is indeed odd that the so-called liberal democracies so often prove to be, in action, quite as imperialistic as avowed autocracies. It is indeed curious that so-called radical parties, when voted into power, are constrained to proceed, in their own fashion, quite as ruthlessly as the conservative parties which they displace. There appears to be some element of bewilderment in the minds of statesmen which prevents them from following their better judgment. There appears to be some under-drag of unreason in public opinion which compels peoples to act contrary to their own interests. The anomaly is an inevitable result of the attempt to straddle two conflicting sets of principles. Both leaders and electorates, while paying lip service to liberal doctrines, are really hypnotized by the ideal of the efficient, self-sufficient state. They intend to be pacific and magnanimous, most assuredly; but first they must have "security." Security implies, among other things, economic solidarity. Tariff barriers are erected to protect all "essential" industries. If

the nations do not possess at home the raw materials necessary for self-sufficiency, they reach out for exclusive resources abroad. A measure of self-government is granted to subject peoples only to be snatched back when the agitation for independence grows dangerous. Of course, this line of policy leads on and on. Colonies must be protected; sea lanes must be guarded; and navies must be provided with bases, fuel stations, and oil reserves. It is impossible for nations, any more than men, to serve two masters.

Some nations, naturally, have travelled further along the road to the new regimentation than others. The United States is undoubtedly the chief exemplar of efficiency. In America we are mad really: we think so much about processes, and pay so little attention to the art of living. When Europeans inveigh against the "Americanization" of the world, they refer to just this sweep toward uniformity and standardization. But Europeans deceive themselves if they imagine America to be the spring of that flood which actually wells from the spirit of the age. America is not more its exponent than its victim; and while efficiency in practice has been applied more drastically in the United States than in Europe, efficiency as a national ideal seems to have been envisioned more sharply in Europe than in the United States. France under every type of party government is intent on the task of knitting her European and African domains into an impregnable economic and military unit. Great Britain is busily cementing and consolidating her vast industrial and imperial power. The British, however, with their inveterate fondness for standing (at one and the same time) on both sides of every matter of principle, like to fancy that they can achieve modern efficiency on the one hand, and retain individualism and muddle on the other. It is an idle hope. Germany transformed herself within a generation from a land of philosophers, toy makers, and music masters into a huge machine, equally well organized for industry or war, and effective in marshalling all the physical and psychic energies of her people. Although Germany found that efficiency was not enough, and came to disaster, the world, including Germany, has not learned the lesson. The trend toward national efficiency is nowhere long retarded. The Western world moves together; and although some nations may spurt here and other nations lag there, they all drift along in the same direction, like a band of boys advancing down a road. Furthermore, the thought of the Orient turns more and more into the ways already channeled by the West. What America and Europe are in this generation, China

and India will become in the next. The East will protest, will resist. But Japan has shown the way.

The ideal of efficiency has gained so tyrannical a hold over the modern mind, and its ramifications and inferences are so numerous and pervasive, that any effort to break its spell seems for the present almost hopeless. It is extremely difficult for any epoch to shake itself free from its superstitions, or, indeed, even to admit that it entertains superstitions. In every age people flatter themselves that their opinions are based on experience and on demonstrable facts; and they attribute superstitions only to past times and backward races. Lecky wrote: "It is often and truly said, that past ages were pre-eminently credulous, as compared with our own, yet the difference is not so much in the amount of credulity, as in the direction which it takes." In the Middle Ages men were obsessed by the supernatural; they believed in the daily presence of good and evil spirits, in Satanic wiles, and in miraculous intervention for the deliverance of the faithful. Miracles now seem to most people rare and remote. Yet in mediaeval times these doctrines were cherished not only by the masses of the people, but by scholars, philosophers, and jurists. "There is a character of ages, as well as of nations," said Walter Bagehot. When once a congeries of ideas and emotions, congenial to the circumstances of a particular era, gets into motion, it rolls on like a flood, and carries all before it.

Broadly speaking, one might say that since the fall of the Roman Empire there have been three great historical epochs, each one of them characterized by distinctive modes of thought and feeling. In the medieval period men's minds were engrossed by religion and theology. This might be called the age of Other Worldliness. The intolerable abuses of power by feudal state and church led to a period of revolt and of emancipation. The rationalistic movement and the democratic movement were the major currents in the four centuries between the beginning of the sixteenth century and the end of the nineteenth century. This might be called the age of Liberalism. Then began the age of Efficiency. Surely it is one of the ironies of history that, having striven for four hundred years to free themselves from the shackles of old institutions, old customs, old ideas, men have chosen in the fulness of their deliverance to embrace the pseudo-ideal of social efficiency. The age of Efficiency was preceded by thirty or forty years of transition, and really began, if one must select a date, with 1914. How long it will last no one can foretell.

Certain social philosophers, without hitting the nail exactly on the head, have deplored "the triumph of mechanism over mankind." A rebellious repudiation of the machine and all its works finds voice in the writings of celebrated critics of the modern order, who blame the machine for both the barbarity of war and the materialism of peace, and who urge man to revolt against this monster which he himself has created. But if strictures of this sort are to be taken seriously then the only sensible thing for us to do is to demolish our factories and power plants, cut our wires and cables, tear up our railroads, and sink our steamships. Such an orgy of tool-smashing would be literalism gone mad. Smelters and steel mills do not in some mystic manner now compel men to do evil, any more than Gothic cathedrals in former times forced men to use the rack and faggot. Destruction of our physical paraphernalia would not remedy the world's intellectual anarchy.

Ideas, and ideas alone, alter fundamental human relationships. What is bringing us to a new order of society and a new type of civilization is the many-sided idea of social efficiency. We march toward social regimentation by definite steps. The laws, the so-called reforms, the institutional changes, which mark our advance, are not fortuitous accidents, but products of intention and will. Those who advocate or countenance the successive encroachments on liberty may not in all instances clearly see the goal toward which they are pressing. But they help to make arrival at the goal certain, and to hasten the day when a new absolutism shall have made robots of workers, and helots of citizens, in the name of efficiency and progress.